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Trans-atlantic (mis)trust in perspective: asymmetry, abandonment and alliance cohesion

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Abstract *This article clarifies the role of trust in alliances with a focus on NATO. We bridge IR scholarship on trust and alliance theory by dealing with trust as a central factor in maintaining alliance cohesion and longevity. NATO has, throughout its history, been characterised by an asymmetric trusting relationship, with Europe being more vulnerable to defection than its American counterpart. This means that a fear of abandonment, intrinsic to the structure of reciprocal commitment in all alliances, has been felt differently on the opposite sides of the Atlantic, with implications for how specific crises have led to a fluctuation in (mis)trust. Whereas the Europeans have harboured mistrust regarding the longevity of the US commitment and extended deterrence, the Americans have doubted the Europeans' faithfulness to US leadership and willingness to share the alliance's burdens. Simultaneously, general trust – cultivated by shared interests, institutions, interdependence and converging identities – has bound the allies together. The article then uses these insights to analyse the Trump presidency, which marked an historic spike in mistrust between the US and the Europeans. Despite the unforeseen tumult, the presidency did not result in the definitive collapse of trust in the trans-Atlantic relationship, let alone NATO.*

Introduction

Donald J Trump's rise to the White House threw trans-Atlantic relations in general, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in particular, into an unprecedented tumult. As part of his 'America First' approach, Trump questioned the value of US-led alliance networks and expressed hostility towards Europe and its core institutions.

The result was consternation in Europe over the future of American security commitments. The overwhelming majority of European allies saw Trump's term as historically threatening for the trans-Atlantic community. Pundits on both sides of the Atlantic worried that mutual trust between the US and Europe was rapidly eroding (Applebaum 2018; Erlanger 2020; Krastev 2019). Crucially, they pointed out that Europeans were losing trust towards the US

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as a security guarantor. It is therefore no wonder that the election of Joe Biden was met with relief on the old continent. However, debates continued to unfold in Europe about US reliability after the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and over US commitment to the trans-Atlantic alliance in the face of Russia's aggression against Ukraine (Bouchet 2022; Rachman 2021). These discussions demonstrate that trust remains a pertinent concern in trans-Atlantic relations – even when a committed trans-Atlanticist holds the presidency.

Such situational fluctuation of trust is a central part of the trans-Atlantic alliance's history, but so is the emergence of a trans-Atlantic 'security community' marked by deep bonds of familiarity and peaceful relations (Adler and Barnett 1998; Risse 2008). Yet, even actors with a long history of cooperation can never be absolutely certain of the intentions of others. Trust is a crucial piece of the puzzle – a belief that allows actors to have faith in others' willingness to reciprocate in the face of uncertainty (Keating 2015b, 5–6).

Still, the role of trust in the NATO alliance, and alliance settings more broadly, remains under-theorised and insufficiently conceptualised. This study fills the lacuna by systematically probing trust within the trans-Atlantic relationship. It asks several questions: What role does trust play in alliances? What factors engender situational mistrust and embed long-term trust between the United States and its European allies? How does the Trump era appear against this backdrop? What are the prospects of the trans-Atlantic relationship in the post-Trump world?

By tackling these questions, the article makes four contributions, three of them theoretical, and one empirical. First, it ties together two distinct bodies of literature between which there has been surprisingly little cross-fertilisation, namely alliance theory and International Relations (IR) theorising on trust. Such bridge-building is necessary, given that trust is generally regarded as a fundamental unit-level variable for creating and maintaining stable social collectives. When it comes to defence alliances, trust is therefore implicated in questions of alliance cohesion and survival.

Secondly, drawing on broader multidisciplinary literature on the concept, the study argues that two dimensions of trust within NATO warrant particular attention, namely trust *specific* to the structure of reciprocal commitment in the alliance and *general* trust built over decades of cooperation. The former pertains to situational or issue-based variation in (mis)trust that periodically arises in alliance relationships, given a fear of abandonment that is intrinsic to such settings. The latter, in contrast, is grounded upon socio-institutional sinews. Shared institutions, practices, norms, values, even collective identities produce a social glue that holds collections of actors together and effectively predisposes them to regard others as trustworthy in an 'open-ended' manner.

Thirdly, the paper posits that the post-Second World War 'trans-Atlantic bargain' has been characterised by an *asymmetric trusting relationship*. Due to the profound asymmetry of power between the US and European allies, fear of abandonment has manifested differently on the opposite sides of the Atlantic, with disparate implications during episodic spats in the relationship. Whereas the Europeans have harboured varying mistrust concerning America's ultimate commitment to European security and extended deterrence, the US has doubted the Europeans' commitment to share alliance burdens and their faithfulness to American leadership. Despite this fluctuation in (mis)trust,

the Atlantic alliance has been held together by deeply ingrained general trust, entrenched in convergent interests, shared values and identities, as well as the strong institutionalisation of NATO.

Finally, the study illustrates how the Trump presidency marked an historic spike in specific mistrust. However, despite considerable clamour, his presidency did not sever the general trust between the US and Europe. Furthermore, the post-Trump era offers more hospitable conditions for nurturing the trusting trans-Atlantic relationship. That said, on-going systemic changes in international relations augur an era of adjustment for the US-Europe relationship. This is the case despite Russia's aggression in Ukraine rejuvenating the transatlantic alliance in the short term. The future could therefore bring more frequent episodes where mistrust comes to the fore. In the long run, such accumulation could jeopardise the cohesion of NATO.

Trust in international relations

Trust is integral to the maintenance of 'stable relationships' and the functioning of society (Misztal 1996, 12). Although scholars working on trust disagree on definitional matters, they concur that the concept is implicated in uncertainty about the future intentions of others. Placing trust in another person means that the prospect of betrayal always lurks in the background (Hoffman 2002, 376–79; Wheeler 2018, 2–4). The decision to trust thus implies putting one's faith in another. There is an expectation, based upon a trustor's beliefs about a trustee's trustworthiness, that the latter will reciprocate trust by refraining from acting in a manner that causes harm to the former (Rathbun 2011, 246–247).

In the IR literature on trust, the concept is treated variously: as a *rational choice calculation* made by a trustor regarding a trustee's constraints, interests and intentions (for example, Kydd 2005); as a *social construct* linked to the rules, norms and values regarding upstanding conduct within a particular social group (see Adler and Barnett 1998; Forsberg 1999; Hoffman 2002); or as a *psychological disposition* that predisposes an individual to be (mis)trusting (for example, Booth and Wheeler 2008; Larson 1997).[1] Given this multiplicity, how an actor comes to hold a (mis)trusting belief is a complex affair. The trustor makes inferences regarding the trustee's interests; how social and 'intrinsic' factors like identity or personal disposition influence the formation of those interests; as well as how the capacity to reciprocate trust is affected by external constraints (cf. Brugger 2015, 80–81; Larson 1997, 709; Wheeler 2018, 4).

For present purposes, we draw on Rathbun's (2011, 246) work and define trust as 'the belief that one will not be harmed when one's interests are placed in the hands of others'. Here we understand harm to actors' interests broadly, encompassing 'those actions that might directly harm an actor and those that potentially corrupt normative standards that the actor believes to be important' (Keating and Abbott 2021, 1093). Such ideational prescriptions, defining the boundaries of the (in)appropriate in a community, are by their very nature socially constructed (Wendt 1999). This underlines not only the inherently

[1] For this tripartite division, see Ruzicka and Keating (2015) and Haukkala, van de Wetering and Vuorelma (2018).

social nature of trusting relationships, but also the social construction of the interests that underpin them.

Adopting such a social framing of trust does not preclude rational elements, at least insofar as trusting forces actors to process information regarding the interests and intentions of others. However, in a complex world any such information is necessarily incomplete; there is always an element of belief and faith (as opposed to certainty) involved. This belief cannot exist independently of the social system within which actors exist (Hoffman 2002; Kegley and Raymond 1990). Put differently, 'trust occurs within a framework of interaction […] influenced by both personality and social system, and cannot be exclusively associated with either' (Luhmann 1979, 6).

Trusting beliefs can be situational and holistic in nature. Actors – including 'corporate actors' like states – can make different assessments of a counterpart's trustworthiness across time, in different domains, and on disparate issue areas. Trust is therefore both context-specific and variable in scope. Moreover, trust and mistrust should not be treated as simply binary opposites (Hoffman 2002, 377, 387). The two can actually coexist in a relationship and do so with varying intensities across time. Juntunen and Pesu (2018) illustrate how the generally trusting Finland-Sweden bilateral relationship, marked by convergent interests and deep identitarian bonds, has been plagued by lingering mistrust on a specific security matter: until very recently Finns remained suspicious that Sweden might opt for NATO membership without Finland. Yet, some relationships, especially ones developed over years of cooperation, remain by and large trusting despite such situational variance – a key insight when analysing a mature alliance like NATO.

Relatedly, trust between states may exhibit variation across different levels of analysis (cf. Keating 2015a; Wheeler 2018). For instance, trusting inter-state relationships where 'collective beliefs' regarding the trustworthiness of another state have become accepted wisdom in state bureaucracies or even society writ large, should be *ceteris paribus* more stable than trusting relationships created only between individual leaders or political elites (Keating 2015b; Sinkkonen 2018).

The literature on trust thus allows us to elaborate on two dimensions particularly relevant to the present study: *general* and *specific* trust. The former relies on the embedded socio-institutional glue that holds collections of actors together within a distinct social group. Students of interorganisational trust, for instance, tie trust-building to 'processes' through which actors learn about each other, 'institutions' as fora for cooperative transactions, as well as trustors' assessments of trustees' 'characteristics', particularly their similarities (Schilke et al. 2017). General trust therefore develops beyond rational calculation or accumulated knowledge; it draws on shared identities (Lewicki and Bunker 1996). Our understanding of general trust thus mirrors what Rathbun (2011, 251) terms 'particularised' (as opposed to 'generalised') 'moralistic trust', namely peoples' propensity to trust members of their 'in-group' as opposed to *all* people.

Specific trust, in turn, refers to (mis)trust intrinsic to a particular relationship *and* context, as captured by Hardin's (2002, 9) 'three-part relation', wherein 'A trusts B to do X' with respect to a matter Y. This can be contrasted with general trust as a 'two-part relation – where actor A trusts persons or

organisations of general type B […] without any constraint on the scope of trust' (Robbins 2016, 17). It is important to stress that general and specific trust are interlinked. 'Cognitive schemas concerned with trust in categories of people and organisations [i.e., the in-group] should positively affect the trust we form in specific people about particular matters' (Robbins 2016, 17). However, in the case of trust being violated in one specific context, 'concerns about the trustee's trustworthiness may spread to other dimensions causing trust […] to erode across multiple facets' (Chen, Saparito, and Belkin 2011, 95). The result could be the eventual downgrading of general trust.

Next, we will examine how these two dimensions of trust manifest in an alliance setting and explore how the findings of IR scholarship on trust relate to alliance literature and its key concepts.

Alliances and trust

Although trust is intuitively pervasive in an alliance context, its influence has been surprisingly understudied in the relevant literature. Exploring alliances through the prism of trust illuminates key issues of concern in the broader alliance literature, most notably alliance cohesion and survival.

Alliances have attracted considerable, albeit fragmentary, attention from IR scholars (Seely 2011). They have produced many partial theories on different aspects of alliances from divergent perspectives (Snyder 1997, 2). Students of alliances have, for instance, focused on alliance formation, stability, and credibility, as well as termination and cohesion. Scholars have also considered the potential assets and liabilities inherent in alliance membership (Lanoszka 2022; Masala 2009; Sperling 2018).

In this study, we follow Leeds et al. (2002, 238) broad definition of alliances as

> written agreements, signed by official representatives of at least two independent states, that include promises to aid a partner in the event of military conflict, to remain neutral in the event of conflict, to refrain from military conflict with one another, or to consult/cooperate in the event of international crises that create a potential for military conflict.

This extensive view acknowledges that alliances' *de facto* influence may extend beyond a hard military core and the ultimate commitment to aid an ally in a conflict. Consequently, allies may have various expectations regarding the behaviour and decisions of their counterparts (Wallander 2000, 706). As Snyder argues (1997, 8) '[a]llies expect their partners to support them on a variety of issues short of war, including diplomatic crises, even though there is nothing in the alliance treaty requiring it.'

From the standpoint of trust, alliances entail states placing their security and even survival in the hands of another state. The implications of misplaced trust could thus be monumental: domination or even extinction (Ruzicka and Keating 2015, 10). Unsurprisingly, states continuously evaluate whether they can trust their allies to keep promises in the event of a military conflict or other serious incident. This kind of suspicion is intrinsic to the structure of

alliance politics, and can undermine alliance cohesion and longevity if managed improperly.

Previous scholarship has discovered multiple variables maintaining alliance integrity. Polarity – within the alliance and beyond – and the distribution of capabilities in the international system are the chief systemic variables affecting alliance unity (Snyder 1984). Important unit-level factors include geographical proximity, the presence or absence of common interests and threats, as well as ideology, identity, and institutions (Risse-Kappen 1996; Sperling 2018, 356-357). Alliances are most likely to last if the members share threat perceptions and fundamental values and if the arrangement is institutionalised (Masala 2009, 387).

The alliance literature has so far not treated trust as a variable engendering alliance cohesion. The diverse scholarship on alliance credibility mainly considers different alliance commitments, the probability of allies honouring such commitments, and the credibility of external deterrence generated by alliances (Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015; Sperling 2018). It does not, however, address how credibility affects alliance cohesion or how credibility-related beliefs emerge. We again argue that trust – both general and specific – influences the unity and longevity of alliances. In other words, the belief that others are trustworthy binds allies together, whereas mistrust may undercut the alliance unity and, *in extremis*, jeopardise its survival.

When it comes to general trust, the most developed formulations in IR reside in the 'security communities' literature. In such constellations, 'war or the threat of force to settle disputes within the region is unthinkable' (Ikenberry 2008, 7) and states 'entertain dependable expectations of peaceful change' (Adler and Barnett 1998, 34). Thomas Risse (2008, 268) argues that 'four elements' – 'interests', 'interdependence', 'institutions' and 'identity' – drive the establishment and sustainability of security communities, or, in our parlance, foster and embed general trust.

As captured in our adopted definition, the *belief* that the other actor will not act in a manner harmful to one's interests is central to the maintenance of a sustained trusting relationship and thus constitutive of a deeper reservoir of trust. Trust is also propped up by recurring transactions through which interdependent actors gain more information about each others' intentions and interests. Knowledge about others' willingness to cooperate generates expectations of future reciprocity necessary for the maintenance of trusting relationships. This, in turn, builds up a reservoir of 'social capital' that can be drawn on in future transactions (Lebow 2017; Putnam 2000).

Institutions entrench this dynamic further. They facilitate trust by setting up 'norms of behaviour, monitoring mechanisms and sanctions', and act as sites of 'socialization and learning, places where political actors learn and perhaps even "teach" others […] their interpretations […] and normative understandings' (Adler and Barnett 1998, 42–43). In addition, trust is reinforced through practices, namely policy actions that 'define collective images of acceptable conduct' (Kegley and Raymond 1990, 57), as well as private and public discourse propagated by influential actors (such as political leaders and elites). These 'trust entrepreneurs' reproduce trusting 'speech acts', which render trust akin to 'conventional wisdom that becomes part of a state's culture or identity' (Brugger 2015, 82). Ultimately, the gradual building of general trust

is linked with the development of a shared identity, which again facilitates the formulation of shared interests (Adler and Barnett 1998, 45–48; Väyrynen 2000; Wendt 1999). Scholars of trust are privy to this link between trust and 'we-feeling': a positive identification bias that makes it easier to trust members of one's in-group than outsiders (Mercer 2005, 96–97; Weinhardt 2015, 30–35).

But what drives specific mistrust episodes within a generally trusting relationship? A fundamental feature of alliance relationships is vulnerability (cf. Booth and Wheeler 2008, 241–243) – the ever-present prospect of being left to one's own devices by a defecting partner (Snyder 1984). This manifests as *fear of abandonment*, intrinsic to the structure of reciprocal commitment (and attendant obligation) necessary for an alliance to exist in the first place. The spectre of defection therefore affects all alliances, even ones that appear *generally* trusting given shared interests, institutions, practices, trust-reinforcing discourse, and identity. We should therefore think of abandonment as a background driver or accelerant of mistrust during specific crises or disagreements that often originate from either the external environment or alliance members' domestic politics. The fear of abandonment is a fundamental factor in alliances because it may undercut alliance cohesion or even lead to its collapse 'if […] members begin to question whether their partners are genuinely committed to providing assistance' (Walt 1997, 161).

Crucially, abandonment should be understood broadly. According to Snyder (1984, 466): 'the ally may realign with the opponent; he may merely de-align, abrogating the alliance contract, he may fail to make good on his explicit commitments; or he may fail to provide support in contingencies where support is expected'. More recent scholarship broadens the concept further. For Rapp-Hooper (2020, 92-93), free-riding – a situation where an alliance partner benefits from an alliance without sufficient contribution – is a subtle form of abandonment. Unequal burden-sharing can thus be interpreted as lack of alliance commitment.

To ameliorate the fear of abandonment, allies need to engage in recurring cycles of trust management. They search for signals of others' trustworthiness in day-to-day conduct, while the norms of reciprocal obligation in an alliance will only remain relevant if periodically reproduced in shared practices, policy discourse or reassuring policy actions. These might include training, diplomatic dialogue, or information and intelligence sharing (Keating 2015b, 9–10; Rapp-Hooper 2020, 57).

NATO's asymmetric trusting relationship

Trust within NATO has attracted limited scholarly attention. Kydd (2001) has studied NATO enlargement as a dilemma, which increased trust among 'old' and 'new' NATO states, but undermined trust between the alliance and Russia. Hellmuth (2017) has identified three issue areas in which trust is significant: extended deterrence, burden-sharing, and enlargement. Böller (2020) has argued that Trump's policies corroded – but did not yet break – the trans-Atlantic security community underpinned by 'thick' trust between the US and Europe.

Our aim is to deepen the understanding of what role trust, in both specific and general dimensions, plays in the trans-Atlantic alliance. The fluctuation of

specific (mis)trust within NATO is intimately intertwined with the fear of abandonment, *the* fundamental vulnerability in alliances. Mistrust related to extended deterrence and burden-sharing are thus both manifestations of this underlying fear. General trust, again, is related to a trusting culture engendered by shared interests, interdependencies, institutions and identities. Finally, unlike Böller's (2020, 306) article, we view the trans-Atlantic trusting relationship as two-dimensional: both the US and Europe are givers and receivers of trust.

The trans-Atlantic bond is deeply asymmetric, affecting how (mis)trust manifests on opposite sides of the Atlantic. As Hoffmann (1979, 88–89) argues, the most profound continuity in the alliance has been geopolitical unevenness. In the distribution of *material* capabilities, this asymmetry prevails whether one looks at state-to-state dyads in the trans-Atlantic space or the entire trans-Atlantic bond.

In such a situation of asymmetry, fear of abandonment weighs differently on the more and less powerful allies. The disproportionately more powerful partner has more options to choose from in the face of abandonment than its less powerful allies, or even a coalition of them. This is accentuated when the partner is the most powerful state in the system, as in NATO (Masala 2009, 386). The US can feasibly 'go it alone' or resort to coalitions of the willing should its allies shun cooperation. For the 'junior' partners, in contrast, abandonment by a significantly more powerful ally not only leaves few feasible options for replacing alliance benefits but may also pose an existential threat.

Viewed from Europe, the 'trans-Atlantic bargain' makes the allies 'asymmetrically vulnerable' and, by implication, they gain or lose disproportionately if their trust is reciprocated or reneged upon by the US. The risks and concomitant rewards thus appear twofold. On the one hand, Americans have remained committed to guaranteeing Europe's security against an existential external threat. In return, European allies have allowed Washington to assume leadership of the Western alliance, giving the US substantial clout in European security matters. Here, the US defaulting on its commitment by breaking the bond of trust could spell external domination. For Europe, the disproportionately powerful US remains *the* security guarantor of last resort, making allies dependent upon Washington's decisions, interests, and goodwill. That said, Europeans are not entirely similar in this respect. Although European allies are practically unanimous about the necessity of the American commitment, the geopolitically most exposed allies in the NATO-Russia frontline are most vulnerable and thus more mindful of the risks and rewards of their alliance with Washington.

Indeed, European doubts regarding the durability of the US commitment have characterised NATO throughout its existence. As Hellmuth (2017) points out, the credibility of American extended deterrence has been the core issue, one that has periodically threatened 'to rip the alliance apart' (Schwarz 1983, 3). Europeans have had serious doubts about whether they 'could trust American commitments and normative obligations to risk the survival of New York for the defense of Berlin' (Risse-Kappen 1995, 184).

Viewed from the US, the European allies are not crucial in ensuring survival – the US is thus less vulnerable to abandonment. Rather, for the Americans, the European allies remain a pool of reliable partners faithful to

the US-led trans-Atlantic community and its norms of reciprocal obligation. Washington can therefore rely upon its allies periodically in order to pursue core foreign and security policy objectives, also further afield. This factor is significant and speaks to the superpower's global security interests: the Europeans buttress US global predominance and the alliance network is a key comparative advantage vis-à-vis America's great-power rivals China and Russia (Norrlof and Wohlforth 2019). Rescinding US commitments to its allies would entail 'hegemonic suicide', while exit from the alliance network by US allies could pose a threat to America's global position.

Therefore, a key trust issue from the American perspective has been the level of commitment of its European allies to US leadership and its preponderance within the trans-Atlantic community (Blankenship 2018). During the Cold War years, the US 'was worried that Europeans would elect neutralist, anti-nuclear or anti-American governments' that could have undermined US leadership and, at worst, resulted in abandonment (Sayle 2019, 5; see also Kaplan 2004, 60). A more novel manifestation of American mistrust has been Washington's recalcitrance towards the development of autonomous European defence encapsulated in 'three Ds': no *decoupling* of the United States from Europe, no *discrimination* against non-EU NATO members, and no *duplication* in European and trans-Atlantic defence resources (Albright 1998).

As pointed out, another problematic issue from the American vantage point has been burden-sharing (Hellmuth 2017). This question has characterised the trans-Atlantic relationship since the 1950s (Bogers, Beeres, and Bollen 2022). The sources of US mistrust and frustration have been the European allies' unwillingness to take greater responsibility for their own security as well as their hesitancy to shoulder the necessary risks of maintaining regional and global security (Sloan 2016, 33, 96).

Despite this periodic fluctuation in mistrust, several static elements maintain *general* trust within the trans-Atlantic alliance. Firstly, converging security interests and the prevalent balance of power in the system drove the US and Europe to engage in alliance building. Over decades, the remit of shared interests has grown from deterring Soviet aggression to keeping the peace in Europe's near abroad, as well as countering terrorism globally. Despite the diverse post-Cold War threat landscape in the Euro-Atlantic region (Jakobsen and Ringsmose 2018), the allies have been able to compromise and bridge their divergent threat perceptions and find sufficient common ground to sustain alliance cohesion (Calmels 2020).

Secondly, interdependence in other realms across the Atlantic has indirect relevance in the NATO context. Manifold interactions proliferate across the trans-Atlantic space, spanning everything from intra-organisational and business-to-business ties to people-to-people contacts (Risse 2016, 30). These embed trust beyond the level of elites in broader society – a more sustainable basis for trust than mere intra-elite cohesion (Sinkkonen 2018).

Thirdly, the development of the institutional framework of the alliance, driven especially by political elites, has helped embed trust within the organisation. As Wallander (2000, 725) argues: '[the organisation] has the headquarters with planning, logistics, and intelligence staffs, including military personnel who have all planned, trained, exercised, and schooled together for

years and developed a deep trust'. This sense of common purpose has cushioned the alliance against political disagreements.

Finally, at a deeper level still, the alliance is not merely 'an institutionalization of the transatlantic security community [it is also] based on common values and a collective identity of liberal democracies' (Risse-Kappen 1996, 363). Despite recent concerns that this 'community of values' is eroding, when contrasted with the world 'outside', Western commonality trumps difference (Wallace 2016). The trans-Atlantic partners 'share similar preferences for democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and a market economy' (Risse 2016, 35). The situation is one of contextual ebb and flow in value convergence and divergence, in part reflecting political tides, underpinned by a broadly shared liberal-democratic value base (Sinkkonen and Vogt 2019). Moreover, this shared identitarian grounding impacts how the allies formulate their interests (Ruggie 1998, 863–864; Wendt 1999, 231).

Yet, the institutional and identitarian foundations of the community rely on 'constitutive narratives' that can be – and in many cases currently are – contested (Adler and Greve 2009, 71; Gheciu 2019). This is the crucial link between general trust and specific episodes of mistrust. Trust management through elite discourse and practices is an essential ingredient of safeguarding the deep socio-institutional sinews that hold NATO together. If disruptive 'mistrust entrepreneurs' get into influential positions, they can use such platforms to aggravate episodic disagreements. If these efforts are sufficiently concerted and resonant on the level of both policy elites and society at large, general trust can eventually be undermined.[2] Beyond the discursive realm, certain sustained policy actions, such as permanent reductions in funding or troop levels, or long-standing unwillingness to engage allies diplomatically, may indicate the erosion of general trust. The duration of mistrust episodes is thus a key dimension when considering the dissipation of general trust.

We now turn to our empirical case and utilise our trust framework to analyse the Trump era. Both rhetorical and behavioural indicators of (mis)trust are relevant. In the former instance, positive or negative statements concerning others' character, their actions and policies constitute signs of trust or mistrust, respectively (Brugger 2015, 88–91; Weinhardt 2015, 35–36). In the latter case, we pay attention to 'hedging strategies', which Keating and Ruzicka (2014, 761) deem especially pertinent signs of trust erosion in mature relationships. Allies can hedge through 'unilateral measures [such as creating alternative relationships or enhancing autonomous capabilities] to minimise the risk of partner abandonment while remaining in the alliance' (Castillo and Downes 2023, 4). The creation of such 'buffers' points towards increase in mistrust, and their removal indicates enhanced trust. Finally, given that trusting is a reciprocal exercise, the way actions and policies – signals – are interpreted by the parties is vital. Allies can, for instance, reveal their trust in policy discourse by deeming the counterpart's behaviour as fair and justified as opposed to unfair and illegitimate (Weinhardt 2015, 36). We disentangle such indicators of trust

[2] Such profound changes in 'collective ideas' imply a complex relationship between the policy agency of elites, the 'stickiness' of ideational structures on both elite and societal levels, and the existence of policy windows that idea entrepreneurs can endeavour to exploit (see Brugger 2015; Legro 2000).

and mistrust from primary documents and secondary sources that report on policy actions.

The Trump presidency: mutual mistrust between the US and Europe

Trust is best gauged during 'ruptures' (Haukkala, van de Wetering, and Vuorelma 2015, 3), and the ascent of Donald Trump to the White House certainly qualifies. His administration's policy towards NATO, and trans-Atlantic relations in general, was paradoxical. The president was antagonistic towards America's European allies, managing the alliance 'coercively' (Rapp-Hooper 2020, 157–67). Yet Trump's peculiar style obscured the administration's continued commitment to the post-2014 policy of restoring US territorial defence capabilities in Europe. That said, US policies more broadly, and the president's convictions especially, were unprecedented. The Americans and the Europeans found themselves at loggerheads not only over burdensharing in security and defence, but also Covid-19, trade, climate, and multilateralism.

From the vantage point of specific trust, Trump heightened the fear of abandonment in most European capitals to an unparalleled level. Interestingly, the source of the trans-Atlantic dispute appeared to be Trump's *personal* mistrust towards the European allies and NATO, illustrative of the importance of levels of analysis when assessing trust in intra-alliance relations. Drawing on his peculiar, ingrained worldview (Laderman and Simms 2017), the president became a '*mistrust entrepreneur*'. Trump also exhibited fear of abandonment: he saw America's European allies as unreliable free riders taking advantage of US commitments. His personal inclinations thus reflected long-standing US doubts regarding the allies' reliability, albeit in a simplified manner and on an intensified scale.

Trump's mistrust entrepreneurship unsettled the trans-Atlantic relationship, as the US adopted burden-sharing as the core pillar of its Europe policy (Mitchell 2018; Pompeo 2018). The US demanded its allies buttress their commitment to NATO by increasing defence spending to NATO's two per cent of GDP spending target. This goal was accompanied by Trump's rhetorical attacks against the alliance and singling out of allies, particularly Germany. He questioned the Europeans' reliability and explicitly blasted them for exploiting the United States' goodwill for seven decades, was long hesitant to endorse Article 5 of the 'obsolete' organisation, and reportedly threatened to withdraw from NATO in the company of fellow alliance leaders (Barnes and Cooper 2019).[3]

Towards the end of his term, Trump's verbal attacks on allies became less frequent, but his hostility remained. The president's difficult relationship with Germany culminated in his decision to pull out 12,000 US troops from the country regardless of the expected costs – a decision that the Biden administration subsequently reversed. There are signs that a second Trump term could have been fatal for NATO; reports indicate that senior US officials were genuinely worried that Trump would have left the alliance (Crowley 2020).

[3] On Trump's early foreign policy, see Lindsay and Daalder (2018), for a 'post-mortem', see Adesnik and Hannah (2021).

The Trump administration's ensuing policies provoked both *rhetorical* and *behavioural reactions* in Europe, expressing conspicuous mistrust towards the American patron. An overwhelming majority of European governments – not to mention European publics – saw Trump in a negative light (Denison 2019).

European signals of mistrust began right after Trump's election, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel reminded the president-elect of the common values that bind Europe and America (Faiola 2016). In spring 2017, Merkel went further by saying that Europe cannot fully rely on others and must take its fate into its own hands, obviously referring to the US (Henley 2017). This message was later echoed by French president Emmanuel Macron. In a famous interview with *The Economist* (2019), he declared NATO 'brain dead' and openly doubted the effectiveness of Article V. Even allies with strong Atlanticist traditions signalled their doubts regarding US commitment. Martin Helme, then the interior minister of Estonia, said that his country was preparing a Plan B in case NATO fails (ERR 2019). Radosław Sikorski, the former Polish Foreign Minister, pointed out that the Europeans had no idea what Trump would do if a crisis with Russia erupted – indicating a heightened concern of abandonment that other Alliance policymakers shared (Polakow-Suransky 2018; Ryan and Birnbaum 2019).

Strikingly, only few European governments, most notably Hungary and Poland, sympathised with Trump's policies and style. However, the Polish government, despite its attempt to court the volatile president, may have privately been concerned about his unreliability (Lanoszka 2020, 445). Also, while European far-right populist parties might have possessed an affinity for Trump, they do not necessarily share his views regarding the obsolescence of NATO and some are amenable to defence spending increases (Henke and Maher 2021).

Although several European leaders voiced rhetorical signals of mistrust, there were far fewer concrete *hedging measures* (Böller 2020), such as significant defence expenditure increases or substantial enhancement of intra-European security forays against perceived US unreliability. Granted, the Trump administration's policies added a further incentive to develop European defence cooperation, and new political frameworks within and outside the European Union were established. Despite these efforts, mistrust towards Trump did not become a centripetal force, one bringing about substantially more autonomous European action in defence.

This begs the question of why Europeans did not begin hedging in earnest against US disengagement or, at worst, the prospect of abandonment – behaviour that could have further undermined NATO's cohesion. Both trust and alliance scholarship offer potential explanations. Importantly, during Trump's term European mistrust was clearly directed towards the president, not necessarily towards the whole administration or government, which managed to signal US commitment and even reassure Europeans; another testament to how trust can vary across different levels. Despite the commander-in-chief's attacks, the Trump administration made tangible investments in European defence and carried out concrete signalling measures – *trust management* – aimed at reassuring Europeans. It, for example, increased the annual budget of the European Deterrence Initiative considerably from $3.4 billion in 2017 to $6.5 billion in 2019 (Congressional Research Service 2021). The US Air Force

also intensified its strategic bomber flights in Europe, a demonstration of US commitment to allies and a signal to adversaries (AP News 2020).

Furthermore, the presence of the so-called 'adults' in the administration evidently helped stabilise the trusting relationship during the first years of Trump's tenure. Less than a month into Trump's tenure, Secretary of Defence Mattis (2017) proclaimed to a European audience that NATO's 'Article V is a bedrock commitment', while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (2017) made a similar declaration to fellow NATO foreign ministers some weeks later. Apprehensive reactions from Europeans following the departure of these *trust entrepreneurs* were indicative of the faith allies had placed in them (Janning 2019).

Because of Trump's unprecedented questioning of NATO's value to US *interests*, the broader American political field also tried to impress upon Europeans the strong US commitment to the continent's security. Especially Congress stepped up as a trust manager. In July 2018, a bipartisan bill prohibiting the use of funds to withdraw the US from NATO was introduced (Congress.gov 2018). NATO's Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg also addressed a joint meeting of Congress in April 2019 by invitation of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, a Democrat. It was an historic session; a bipartisan move to comfort America's European allies and embed trust (Oprysko and Toosi 2019).

General trust within NATO did not erode as quickly as the specific trust towards American commitment during Trump's unorthodox tenure. Shared liberal values like human rights and rule of law, not to mention democratic norms and free trade precepts, were certainly challenged by Trump's foreign policy (Lindsay and Daalder 2018). Most Europeans also felt alienated by Trump's policies (Wike, Fetterolf, and Mordecai 2020), and European elites chafed at his disregard for multilateral cooperation, whether on climate or the Iran nuclear deal (Brattberg and Whineray 2020). While all these presented potent challenges to the trans-Atlantic 'community of values', post-Trump era polls have shown that Europeans have been more positively disposed towards the United States during the Biden presidency (GMFUS 2021; Wike et al. 2021).[4] While some of this fluctuation may be explained by European preferences for Biden and the Democrats, it also illustrates that Trump's four years in office were too short-lived to cause a profound erosion of the transatlantic community. A collective *identitarian baseline* still exists, reflecting sufficient general trust in Europe to 'forgive' America's Trumpian hiatus.

Most important in terms of general trust, NATO kept functioning as an *institution* and implementing its pre-Trump policy turn towards the collective defence of Europe as its core mission. At the Brussels summit in 2018, the allies, among other things, decided to establish two new commands to ensure open sea lines of communication in the Atlantic and to facilitate military mobility in Europe. Further decisions included the introduction of the NATO Readiness Initiative which was to improve the readiness of the allied forces (Wemer 2018).

[4] Krastev and Leonard's (2021) similar study shows Europeans to be positive regarding Biden, but not particularly trusting of the US electorate.

Conclusion: trans-Atlantic trust in the post-Trump era

This article has argued that both specific and general dimensions of trust play a central role in sustaining alliances and maintaining their cohesion. Throughout the history of NATO, the fear of abandonment – intrinsic to the structure of reciprocal commitment in alliances – has factored differently on the two sides of the Atlantic, accelerating mistrust whenever disagreements have occurred. The Trump era presented a potent example of such a crisis, driven by an unorthodox president whose inclinations nevertheless reflected long-running differences over alliance burden-sharing. This challenge to the relationship, and especially the presence of rhetorical indicators of specific mistrust towards the US in Europe, illustrates the pertinence of trust questions within NATO also in the future. Trust management through policies and discursive means will remain essential, lest specific mistrust episodes erode the reservoir of general trust.

Joe Biden's presidential term so far has witnessed the ebb and flow of trust between the US and its European allies. Europe's initial hopes that Biden would provide competent leadership of the trans-Atlantic community were abruptly replaced by disillusionment over the failed American withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, the Biden administration's principled action before and after the Russian 're-invasion' of Ukraine has rejuvenated the Europeans' confidence in their patron's trustworthiness. Yet the Europeans remain mindful that China continues to be the 'pacing threat' for Washington, rendering Europe the secondary theatre of great-power competition once Russia's 'acute threat' threat subsides (Simón, Desmaele, and Becker 2021). Therefore, the trans-Atlantic relationship must adjust to the realities of a new global security landscape.

The burden-sharing question will likely colour the coming adjustment, and may even gain more significance if the US decides to rejig where it spends its finite resources (Mitchell 2021). Secondly, the US will expect loyalty from its European allies as the US-China rivalry intensifies. An underlying concern is that some European states may be willing to pursue a more neutral line between the US and China, refusing to align themselves with Washington's policies – an echo of the old Cold-War-era concern of a neutralist European posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Thirdly, the implications of this long-term strategic turn for the US commitment to Europe remain unclear. In fact, security pundits hold different views on how the US should balance between the Asian and European theatres (Colby and Mastro 2022; Simón 2022). Diverse perspectives notwithstanding, Europeans will certainly doubt whether a China-focused US remains committed to the continent's security. Lastly, domestic uncertainty prevails on both sides of the Atlantic. The polarisation of American politics is an 'X-factor' when it comes to the durability of US global commitments. The Trump presidency reflected a profound change in the US body politic and left a permanent mark on Europeans. Conceivably, another Trump-like figure will one day rise to the presidency, keeping Europeans on their toes in the post-Trump world.

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